

The Middlesteins Study Guide

The Middlesteins by Jami Attenberg

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Plot Summary

Richard and Edie Middlestien are a typical Midwestern family and have been for more than thirty years. They live in the Chicago suburbs, have two children, earn their living from respectable professions, and have good, solid friends.

But Edie is obese and has life threatening diabetes. She weighs more than 300 pounds and is about to undergo a second surgery to put a stent in her leg. Her other leg already has one. The doctors have warned that the next surgery may be for a bypass if she doesn't lose weight.

Edie's weight has already forced her into early retirement, not due to health or performance issues, but because of her appearance, and right before her second surgery, Richard leaves her.

Edie's daughter, Robin, who has tried to keep her distance since she left home, decides that she needs to be there for her mother now that her father has left. She starts spending more time with Edie and at the same time starts dating her longtime friend, Daniel. She rejects her father for his actions.

Rachelle, Edie's daughter-in-law, is in the middle of planning her children's b'nai mitzvah when the crises occurs. But she decides to launch a plan including the entire family to restore Edie's health. Her plan includes Robin and her daughter Emily walking with Edie around the track for exercise and finding experts who can help Edie lose weight and overcome her food addiction. In the process, she turns against junk food and enforces vegetables on everyone including the members of her book club.

At first her husband, Edie's son Benny, tries to remain neutral, but comes to realize that his mother raised him with love and he respects her, but he can't respect his father and his choice to leave his mother when she's sick. He also starts losing his hair and confronts his wife about their diet. At the same time, their daughter, Emily, tires to escape through the window and falls and breaks her arm.

As all of this is happening, both Edie and Richard meet new companions. Edie's is a Chinese man whose restaurant she helps save. Richard meets a British woman.

The b'nai mitzvah takes place and later that evening, Kenneth, Edie's e new boyfriend, finds her dead in the kitchen. She's buried, but Richard, even though he's invited to the funeral and the gathering afterwards, is treated like a guest. While the second generation of adults and their partners bond at the gathering. Richard remains in exile, but reaches out to his granddaughter Emily and bonds with her.



Section 1, pp. 1-55

Summary

The Middlesteins is the story of seven members of a dysfunctional, suburban Jewish family and how they deal with one event, Edie Middlestein's health, amidst their own insecurities and fears.

Chapter 1 begins with five year old Edie (maiden name Herzen, married name Middlestein) and her mother climbing the four flights of stairs to the family's apartment. Edie weighs 62 pounds and is having a hard time making it up the stairs. She begs her mother to carry her. Her mother, who is weighed down with groceries and Edie's library books, refuses. She tells Edie that she's tired, too. In an effort to get Edie to help, she gives her the library books to carry since they are hers anyway.

The added burden proves to be too much for Edie. She plops down on the stairs and throws the bag of books on the floor. Edie whines that she wants her mother to carry her adding that her father would if he were there. Edie's mother tries to reason with her. As she does so, she feels sweat rolling down her arm. She attempts to wipe the sweat away with the grocery bag in that arm, but ends up losing control of both bags. The groceries fall out, hitting Edie on the head before reaching the ground. Two cans hit Edie's fingertips. Edie starts to cry so loudly that the neighbors peak out to see what is going on.

The events cause her mother to give Edie all of her attention. She drops the bags and tries to see Edie's fingers. Edie hides them. Finally Edie's mother bribes her with food. Edie first refuses, but gives in when her mother pretends that she is going to eat everything herself. Eating soothes Edie, she stops crying and shows her mother her fingers. Her mother continues to soothe her. Edie repeats her request for her mother to carry her. This time her mother gives in and continues up the stairs carrying Edie, the groceries, and the library books.

In Chapter 2 the narrative shifts to present-day Chicago and the point of view becomes that of Edie's daughter, Robin. Robin is going to meet her neighbor and friend, Daniel, at a neighborhood bar. Daniel is already there when she arrives. The two friends are there to toast an upcoming operation on Edie's leg. Edie has already had the same operation on her other leg.

When Daniel asks which leg is being operated on, Robin admits that she doesn't know and goes on to say that she cares, but doesn't want to know. She also doesn't know how to help her mother. Daniel tells her that she's not a terrible person and she can help her mother by just being there.

The two toast again, but this time to Robin's parent's marriage, which is ending. When Daniel makes a sarcastic remark about her parent's marriage, Robin tells him that he's



mean. Daniel tells her that he can see through her and that she's a sentimental old fool. Robin initiates a kiss with Daniel. He wants to talk about this shift in their relationship. She doesn't. The two leave the bar together in silence.

In Chapter 3, the narration shifts back to Edie's childhood. She is now 202 pounds and has started sneaking downstairs late at night to eat. On one particular night she goes downstairs and finds Naumann, a man who stays at her house off and on, sitting at the kitchen table. He makes a pass at her. She refuses him, finishes her food, and then screams loudly enough to wake everyone up with the exception of the deaf man who also stays at their house.

Chapter 4 introduces another point of view, that of Edie's daughter-in-law Rachelle, and moves back to present-day Chicago. Rachelle and Benny, Rachelle's husband and Edie's son, are discussing Edie's health. Rachelle has noticed that Edie's teeth are decaying. She questions Benny about why his father hasn't talked to Edie about her teeth. Benny reveals that he doesn't want to talk about the issue. When Rachelle asks him whether he's worried about his mother, he responds that all he does is worry about her. Rachelle comforts him and then he suggests that she talk to his mother about the issue. Rachelle agrees to do it.

The next day, Rachelle drops her twins, Josh and Emily, off at the dance class they've been taking to prepare for their b'nai mitzvah party. While the class is going on, she goes to see Edie. However, when she arrives she just sits in her car thinking how unfair it is that she has to be the one to talk to Edie. Then she sees Edie leaving the house. She drives away before Rachelle can get out of the car. Rachelle decides to follow her.

Rachelle watches Edie as she drives to two fast food restaurants, eats the food, and disposes of the packaging. Finally Edie drives to a Chinese restaurant. Rachelle looks on as Edie goes in and receives a warm greeting from the waitress. Rachelle considers dragging Edie out of the restaurant, but decides against it. Instead she goes back to the dance studio and watches the end of the dance lesson. When the lesson is over, she discusses the kid's progress and b'nai mitzvah party planning issues with Pierre, their teacher. She spontaneously decides to invite him to the party. He says that he will check his schedule.

Later that evening, Rachelle, Benny, and the twins eat dinner together. Afterwards they watch *So You Think You Can Dance*. After watching one of Pierre's students, who is a favorite, Emily laments that she will never be that good and leaves the room. The kids go to bed and Benny and Rachelle discuss the kid's dance progress. Then Benny changes the subject and asks if Rachelle talked to his mother. Rachelle lies, not for the first time, and says that she had gone to Edie's house, but nobody was home. The discussion continues and Rachelle tells Benny that he's the one who should be talking to his mother, not her. Benny says that he'll call his father. Rachelle gives a flippant remark and ends the conversation.

The next morning the twins practice their dance moves as their parents watch. Josh pleases his parents by making a beautiful move. Benny says that he'll go to his parent's



house. Rachelle kisses him and later creates a plan in her mind of how everyone will work together to improve Edie's health.

The children go to their dance lesson. Everyone is excited when Rachelle returns to pick them up. They have experienced a breakthrough moment. Rachelle prepares to write a check to pay for the month's lessons and realizes that she needs a pen. When she asks Pierre for one, he opens his desk drawer, revealing a lot of invitations. The sight and implications unnerve Rachelle. She steadies herself by focusing on her goal of improving Edie's health.

That evening Rachelle's family watches Victor Long win the So You Think You Can Dance Competition. The twins go to bed and Rachelle joins her husband outside. There, he breaks the news that his father has left his mother. Rachelle can't understand how her father-in-law can leave a sick woman and declares that he is no longer welcomed in their house. Josh can hear her screaming from his room and he hears his father finally give in.

Analysis

By the end of the first section, readers have met the Middlesteins either "personally" or through other people. This is fitting as even though Edie is the protagonist, the novel is not only about her. As the title states it is about the Middlesteins. It is about their insecurities and fears and how they carry these attributes into their attempt to achieve one thing -- getting Edie healthy. And since Edie is the protagonist, it's equally fitting that the novel's first chapter focuses on the root of Edie's association with food.

The first chapter establishes how society views Edie -- according to her weight. At only five years old, she weighs 62 pounds. When she cries in the stairwell, the neighbors open the door and see that it's just the "fat child" being a kid. Even her mother realizes that she weighs too much. But she can't deny her food. That's because in their family, food has several meanings.

First and foremost, "food is made of love and love is made of food." Food also means life, especially for their family. It gives nourishment. Nobody knows that more than Edie's father who almost starved to death on his journey to Chicago. Food also has a special meaning because of the family's religion. There's the image of the Jewish mother saying "Have a little more." But also, due to a history of deprivation and hunger, there's the idea that it's always best to be prepared. This is the world of food Edie grows up in. For her, food provides a reliable form of comfort.

The reader sees her dreaming of comfort and at the end of the chapter she manages to get it.

Robin's introduction supports several themes. First that of family relationships and the journey. Robin is surprised to hear her mother say that her father 'flew the coop', but she did the same thing when she escaped to Brooklyn. She came back even more disillusioned than she had been when she left and even though her journey led back to



Chicago, she still kept her distance by living in Chicago and not in the suburbs as the rest of her family does.

Robin doesn't like to communicate with others. When she kisses Daniel and he wants to talk about the change in their relationship the kiss represents, she tells him that that's exactly what they shouldn't do. She also tries to avoid commitment. Her roommate calls Daniel Robin's boyfriend, but she says he isn't, and her decision to finally let him into her life in another capacity makes it sound like she is simply settling for the most convenient option to fulfill the need she has at the time.

This part of the story also shows how society views addictions. Robin is a school teacher. She drinks, she has sex with various partners, but nobody focuses on this because she does it in the shadows. It is not seen.

To add to the family relationship theme, readers find out that Robin doesn't want to know what is going on with Edie. Benny expresses the same sentiment. And in both cases it is their partner who has to advise them.

This section also shows the dominance of the women in the family. Edie, Robin, and Rachelle all have dominant personalities. And they all need to be in control. Rachelle's situation is the extreme. There have been so many things in life that were not in her control, her pregnancy for instance, that she tries to control everything and make it perfect. Readers see this in her planning of the b'nai mitzvah and her obsession with Edie's health.

This section also scrutinizes the hypocrisy that can exist in society. People want to be associated with Pierre because of the famous people he knows. But they have to weigh it against his sexual orientation. He pretends to be their friends, but has better things to do than attend their functions.

And of course, from society's point of view, it is not right for a husband to leave his sick wife. Thus, Richard is banned from the house and from seeing his grandchildren.

Discussion Question 1

How does Edie's early life contribute to her relationship with food? Could she have overcome its influence. If so, how? If not, why not?

Discussion Question 2

Which view do you think was justified -- Richard's for leaving his wife or Robin's and Rachelle's for rejecting him? Support your opinion.



Discussion Question 3

Both Robin and Benny say they care about their mother, but they are reluctant to step in and help her. Why do you think this is? Why hasn't the family stepped in to do more before?

Vocabulary

disarmingly, protruding, synagogue, wistfully, rivulet, lurching, coddled, despicable, irrelevant, scot-free, trauma, cuticles, neurosis, luscious, flinched, missives, gesture, caustic, indeterminate, tribute, b'nai mitzvah, nitpicky, montage, diligent, morbidly, correlative, sullen, Pilates, smirk, crooning, bemoaned, muster, rebuff



Section 2, pp. 56-100

Summary

The narration shifts to Edie's perspective. She is in law school and weighs 160 pounds. She is supposed to go on a blind date set up by her next-door neighbor, Carly. But the date is on the same evening that her father's medical test results may come in. Not knowing exactly when they will come in along with the other unpredictable events in Edie's life at the moment is too much for her. She calls her blind date and asks if they can meet earlier and eat near the hospital instead of eating at the place they had chosen previously. Her date (who is her future husband, Richard) was looking forward to going to the restaurant because it was something new.

Edie gives logical arguments to contradict each of his. In the end, he laughs at her. This act shocks Edie. She didn't see anything funny about anything. Finally she tells him to meet her in front of the dorm and the time to be there.

When they meet, Edie suggests a restaurant and he agrees. They start to go there, but as they get closer to the hospital, Edie feels drawn to her father. Richard tells her that the test results will be the same whenever they are delivered. He tells jokes, but Edie isn't impressed. She compares him to her father, but doesn't tell him what she really thinks. Instead she says that her father is sick and that she can't eat. Richard says that he knows, but she has to eat. He promises to take care of things.

The date ends up taking place in Edie's father's hospital room. They eat pizzas from the pizzeria they had planned to go to and Edie's father laughs at Richard's jokes.

The chapter 'Middlestein in Exile' shifts to Richard's perspective in current-day Chicago. He's moved into and decorated his own place. He's also active in the world of Internet dating. He doesn't have any luck with his Internet dates until he meets a girl named Tracy who was close to Benny's age. He turns her down after their first date when he finds out that she's looking for a sugar daddy. But he does keep her number. After a disastrous week during which Benny tells him that he can't see his grandchildren for now, Robin gives him the cold shoulder, and he makes a date cry, he decides to send Tracy an email saying that he wouldn't mind seeing her again. She responds right away. He goes to her house and has sex with her.

Afterwards he feels great and even though he doesn't plan to take their relationship any further, he keeps her number as an emergency contact. His encounter makes him realize that he does want to find another woman, but she needs to be his equal. He increases the age of the type of woman he's looking for on the Internet dating site and receives lots of options. Clicking through the pictures he finds one of a woman that attracts him. A closer look is all he needs to realize that it's Edie's picture. A tourist had taken it when Richard and Edie were on vacation in Italy. Richard had also appeared in



the picture, but they had stood far enough away from each other that it was easy to cut him out of it.

While looking at the picture, Richard thinks that he wants Edie back, but only if she still loved him and he knows that she doesn't and would never do so again.

The next chapter shifts to a 30-year-old Edie eating with her young children at McDonalds. There is a lot of food on the table. Eddie plans to eat both a Big Mac and a McRib sandwich. She has gotten a chocolate cookie and an apple pie for Benny even though Benny has said he doesn't want either one of them. Edie gets them just in case he changes his mind. Benny doesn't care one way or the other about the food. Instead he and Robin play with their toys. Edie eats.

Edie thinks the kids are boring so to make things more interesting she asks them what they did at school that day. Benny speaks first. After telling her about his day, he gives Edie a necklace he has made for her. Seeing the necklace and how happy he is to give it to her makes Edie feel guilty for being so bored with them. She praises the necklace and puts it on. Benny tells her that she looks pretty. Edith doesn't agree. Her work clothes are getting tighter, but she hasn't gotten new ones. The idea of joining Weight Watchers crosses her mind.

Her attention returns to her children. She asks Robin about her day. Robin answers with the word "strawberry." Edie finds out that Robin likes strawberries. Once the strawberry discussion is over, Edie brings Robin's attention to the fries in Robin's kids meal. She threatens to eat them if Robin doesn't. Robin proclaims that she likes fries and refuses to share with Edie after Edie takes a few. Edie relinquishes the fries.

Edie returns her attention to the McRib just as Richard arrives. He looks at all of the remains on the table, sits next to Benny and asks whether he can have the McRib. He kisses Robin and takes one of her fries. Robin says that the fries are hers.

Edie complains that Richard is late, doesn't accept his excuse, and tells him that she hates him using a tone that she hopes won't reveal what she said to Benny.

Richard responds with a joke and turns his attention to Benny's toy. His attention turns to the sandwich and he tells Edie that he's hungry and really would like to have the sandwich.

Edie says that he can't have it. She goes on to complain about all that she's had to do with the kids during the day.

Richard suggests that he take the kids to play and that she sit and eat her sandwich. Edie complains that she doesn't want to sit there. Richard tells her to sit wherever she wants. No one else cares where she sits either. Finally she goes to a reclusive booth and reads as she eats her sandwich.



Analysis

This section further explores the themes of family and relationships, love, and societal expectations. And readers finally get to meet the outsider in the Middelstein family, Richard. The fact that he was talked of, but didn't actually appear in the first section symbolizes his exile. It's not by accident that the chapter in which readers finally get his perspective is called 'Middlestein in Exile'. Neither is it by accident that his story is sandwiched between Eddie's perspective before they got married and afterwards. His family takes Edie's side and her story dwarfs his.

The first chapter in this section, Edie, 160 Pounds, foreshadows the future dysfunctional family. Their beginning sets the foundation. The couple didn't find each other on their own. Edie wasn't even the woman Richard had originally been attracted to. That woman was Carly, Edie's next door neighbor. And Edie wasn't interested in finding a husband. But Carly had thrown the two together.

When they meet, Edie and Richard operate on different levels. He wants to go to a restaurant because it's fun and new to him. Edie doesn't do fun. Later in the section, readers learn that she's never gotten the hang of playing. She found it boring. Richard, on the other hand had no problem playing with the children. Later in the section, Edie describes Richard's entrance as that of an up-and-coming comedian on The Tonight Show. Indeed, this comedian streak appears on their first date. He tells jokes and while he does so, Edie can't help but compare him to her father. Her father had helped people, he was an intellectual. What did Richard know about any such thing? There was no way that he could be her equal.

The two argued about the surface issues, where to eat, but she did not communicate her deeper feelings. Instead Edie kept the conversation on the surface level, only saying that her father was sick. She is also unable to express her feelings in front of Richard and her father. She goes to the bathroom to cry and nobody comforts her. They simply pretended not to see her go.

Meals are symbols of bonding. But Edie and Richard are already not bonding. This foreshadows the many meals Edie eats away from Richard and her children.

Richard views their disagreement about the importance of a restaurant's ambiance as part of them getting to know each other. He's right, but neither of them pays attention to signs that they might not be compatible. Richard is looking for a smart Jewish girl and Edie, who is in law school, fits the profile. Also, he meets Edie when she's vulnerable. He can step in and be the hero. But the real Edie is the one who argues about the restaurant. Not knowing this, he places the emphasis on the wrong Edie.

Edie is about to lose her father, and much like Robin who decides that Daniel will do when she kills her feelings for her father in her heart, Edie finds Richard to be a suitable placeholder.



Society's pressure pushed them together. Carly says Edie should "try and find a husband at some point." Edie herself raises the contradiction. They are supposed to be feminist, but they are still supposed to get married. Later in the section readers find out that her marriage is one area she thinks she has failed in. She had married the first man who had come along and asked. And she had married too young.

It's ironic that at their ten-year wedding anniversary, everyone toasts to Richard's standing by Edie in her time of need when later, when she does really need him, he leaves. His actions say something about his character. He stood by her when he was able to take the lead, but when he was faced with ideas and opinions that are different from his, he leaves. He does the same thing with Robin whenever she expresses opposing ideas and later he does it to Edie.

His last departure raises the question of what do you owe your spouse and what do you owe yourself when you're married and aren't happy. When one gets married they say that they will stay for better and for worse, in sickness and in health. Is it acceptable for Richard to leave his sick wife to search for love and his own happiness before it's too late?

He thinks so, but his family members don't. And he finds that dating is not as easy as he thought it would be. It's interesting that he first attempts to find women who were younger than he. His actions mimic those of stories one hears about men having a mid-life crises, leaving their wives for younger women. His attraction and subsequent meeting with Tracy, who had babysat his children generates thoughts of men who fall in love with their children's nanny, or the nanny who falls for the man in the family because he can take care of her.

But Tracy's character goes even a bit further. What is the difference between her and women who marry men because they will take care of them financially? Tracy is honest about her needs. But are other women who do the same also "half hookers?" Everyone knows they exist and people can spot them. That's why Richard concludes that he can never be with Tracy -- because of the society issues. He can't be seen with her in front of his friends. In the shadows is okay, but not in front of the friends. This is a commentary on the hypocrisy of society.

Tracy's character has one more role. She is his comfort food. After he gets his fix he feels great, and keeps her number just in case he needs her form of comfort again.

Richard's realization that he needs to find someone closer to his age shows that he is not simply going through a mid- life crises looking to reclaim his youth with a younger woman. He is truly looking for love. But just as he's about to move forward, readers find out that he still hasn't gotten over his soon-to-be ex wife. This raises the question as to whether or not someone who has spent years with another person can be emotionally available for someone else.

Edie, 210 Pounds answers questions about why Edie continues to eat and shows just how dysfunctional the family really is. Readers find out that Edie feels that she has lost



her way and that she has failed. As someone who is always looking for comfort, she finds that comfort in food.

Still Benny shows unconditional love by giving her a necklace he made and telling her that she's pretty. Edie does have feelings for her children and she shows it by thinking that she felt like shit. Even later the children admit that they care for their mother. And Edie is there for her children even though she finds them dull. Rachelle would also rather be doing other things, but puts her all into her children and family. The love given to the children versus that given to adults could be showing that children give, and are given, unconditional love. They are entitled to love, whereas adults have to work for it.

Finally readers have more evidence of how dysfunctional the family is. Instead of celebrating the bond of eating together, Edie eats alone so regularly that the children think that this happens in every household. And Edie doesn't understand why anyone wouldn't want to leave their home if they faced danger. She would be more than willing to do so, probably even if she weren't in danger.

Discussion Question 1

Why do you think Richard didn't abandon Edie on their first date when her father was in the hospital, but did later when she was sick?

Discussion Question 2

Who reminds you more of Eddie - Robin or Benny, and in what ways? How did their childhood influence their adult lives?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the differences people face when dating early in life compared to dating later in life. Why do you think Richard and Edie look for new partners? What does this tell you about love?

Vocabulary

appalled, lucidity, entrenched, hippie, pristine, feminists, careened, devastation, gorgeous, famished, insomnia, emanating, phenomenal, contemplated, emoticon, cascading, middling, incite, obsessive, remnants



Section 3, pp. 101-163

Summary

Robin turned her back on Judaism a long time ago. Now after thirteen years of not participating in Jewish celebrations, she's attending a Passover Seder at Daniel's family's house.

She and Daniel are dating now. She has a problem admitting it, but he has decided that she's the one for him. The relationship is normally lopsided. Robin's the one in control, but Daniel wants Robin to meet his family and he won't take no for an answer. Robin still tries to get out of going. When he asks why, she comes up with excuses. She says that she hated Hebrew school. He implies that kids in general tend to dislike Hebrew school and he doesn't think that's a good reason to reject religion. He, himself, was picked on at school because he was so smart. So, he continues to press her to have dinner with his family.

He knows that she's not telling him the real reason she doesn't want to go and he's right. Even though she is spending time with her mother now as part of Rachelle's plan to improve Edie's health, she has been rejecting invitations from Benny and her parents for years. She felt like going to Daniel's family's house would be cheating on her family. Finally, though, she agrees to go.

Once there, she meets members of Daniel's family and realizes why Daniel calls his parent's house "home." One member of Daniel's family, his great aunt Faye, draws attention to the fact that Robin and Daniel are a couple. She also spends the evening criticizing Daniel's mother.

Robin participates in every event though she's not happy about the amount of food she has eaten. As the evening draws to a close and the guests begin to leave, the question arises as to who is going to give Daniel and his girlfriend a ride to the train station. They also express their approval of the couple. Robin looks for a way to escape all of the attention until it is time to leave. She sees some dirty dishes and devises a plan to stay in the kitchen doing dishes until it's time to leave.

Daniel's mother and father are already in the kitchen fighting about Faye. Daniel's mother wants his father to drive her home. She is tired of her and her criticism. When they realize that Robin is in the kitchen they stop fighting. Robin explains why she's there. Daniel's mother takes the dishes and tells her that she is always welcomed in their home. His father offers to give Robin and Daniel a ride to the train station.

When they get home, Robin mentions the fight between Daniel's parents. Daniel says that they don't always agree and adds that just because a couple fights doesn't mean that they are destined to get a divorce. He asks her if she's considered that her parents are better off separated. She has, but she won't admit it.



The conversation continues. Daniel tries to get her to admit that the evening was okay up until that point. Robin says that she really didn't pay attention to the religious aspects. The couple argue about the role of religion in one's life. He asks her to stop being tough for just one minute. She refuses, but she also realizes that she's falling in love with him.

The narration of the chapter, Edie, 241 Pounds, switches to a younger Edie when Robin was a teenager. Edie and Robin are sitting at the kitchen table. There are cookies and a letter. The letter is from Robin's high school. It relays that a boy has killed himself. The boy was one of Robin's two best friends. Robin's other best friend is in a mental hospital.

Before Robin had started high school, she and Edie had been close. It was only the two of them. Benny was away at college and Richard was always working.

Things changed, however, when Robin started high school. She started spending time with the two boys and Edie didn't know what was going on in her daughter's life.

Robin knew that her friend was in the hospital. Before he died, she had wanted to visit him, but Edie wouldn't let her go.

When the news comes about the boy's death, Eddie says she's sorry. She lets Robin eat all of the cookies because she has more.

At the table, Robin explains that the two boys were her only friends. Edie thinks that she can make new friends, but Robin tells her she can't. The kids make fun of both her and Edie because they are fat. Edie says that she does not like that word and apologizes for disappointing Robin. Robin says that Edie doesn't disappoint her, she disappoints herself.

Then Robin throws up. Edie feels like doing the same, but doesn't. After that incident, Robin starts to lose weight. She joins the track team and gets thin. Edie remains the same.

The next chapter, 'The Golden Unicorn', is from Robin's point of view.

Edie loves telling Robin stories about Richard and wants to tell her another one, but Robin wants to get something to eat. Edie doesn't want to eat in front of Robin and Robin knows this. She confronts Edie and Edie agrees to eat with Robin. Both women have been drinking and Edie has had more than Robin, but she drives. They go to a Chinese restaurant.

When they get there, a Chinese girl sitting at a table runs over to hug Edie. Edie tells her that she hasn't been there recently because she has not been feeling well. This is the first Robin has heard of this. The two women chat and then Edie introduces the Chinese girl to Robin. The Chinese girl tells Robin how much they love Edie at the Chinese restaurant. The news shocks Robin and she wonders why they love her so much. She soon finds out that Edie has been helping them run the business side of the



restaurant. This news makes Robin happy. When she meets the owner, she realizes that he's in love with Edie. She's shocked when he tells her that she looks like her mother, but concludes that it's the eyes. He leaves.

Robin likes the place and can imagine the whole family eating there until she tastes the food and takes in the quantity. It's overkill. Her mother, however, just eats and eats. All Robin can think of is that they are killing her with all of this food.

When they leave, Robin tells Edie that she has to stop eating like that because she's killing herself. She doesn't want Edie to die. Edie replies that she didn't know Robin cared. Robin tells her to stop trying to make her feel bad about being herself. Then she reminds her mother that she's there now. The narrative foreshadows that it's too late.

The next chapter, 'Male Pattern', is basically from Benny's perspective. Benny is having a problem he never thought he would have. His hair is falling out in clumps. He knows that there are a lot of other problems complicating his life as well. His daughter, Emily, has become dark and moody. His mother's health and diabetes are all Rachelle talks about. In fact, she's so obsessed that she is stalking Edie. Benny doesn't approve of that and tries to get Rachelle to stop, but Rachelle won't listen

Benny knows that Rachelle doesn't believe that he's worried about his mother, but he is. He also worries about Rachelle and Emily who seem to have forgotten how to smile. His father's new life also worries him. As for Robin, he suspects that she has finally met someone and has fallen in love. So, he's not worried about her.

But, he thought that he would never have to worry about his hair. And now he has a bald spot on the back of his head and his hairline is receding. Seeking a medical explanation as to why his hair is falling out, Benny decides to go to see his doctor (Dr. Harris). The doctor goes down the list of possible causes. The first in genetics, Benny reassures the doctor that there are no bald people on either side of the family.

Next, Dr. Harris suggests that stress could be the problem. The doctor's wife is in the same book club as Rachelle and has told him that Rachelle wants to replace pastries with healthy options. This narrative gives the doctor knowledge about what Benny may be going through. Benny knows that the doctor is right, but he doesn't want to admit to a stranger that he has enough stress to make his hair fall out.

The doctor offers to run some tests and gives Benny a prescription. Dr. Harris goes on to say that while he's waiting for the medication to work, he can relax or even talk to a therapist. The latter is not an option for Benny. Instead of making an appointment, he goes to his father's pharmacy.

Richard hasn't seen Benny for a month and is shocked to see how much hair he's lost. When Richard asks if he's sick, Benny gives him the prescription. He tells his father that he doesn't know what is wrong. The two men go to the back of the pharmacy. Benny has mixed feelings about telling his father that he's angry. Once in the back, Richard asks Benny what Dr. Harris had to say. Benny tells him that the cause of his hair loss is probably stress. Richard replies that it must be a lot of stress for Benny's hair to fall out



as it has. Benny tells him that given the situation, his parents getting divorced and his mother about to die, that he is under a lot of stress.

Then Benny asks his father how things are going for him. Richard tries to explain himself. He tells Benny they he's not perfect, but he had to leave. Edie was killing him and there was no way to fight Edie.

Richard fills his prescription and Benny finds that he's happy to have not turned into his worse nightmare, his father. He now knows that he has to figure things out himself. As Benny leaves, Richard asks him if he can come by sometime. Benny says that he still has to work on it.

When Benny gets home, he eats a vegetarian based dinner with his family. After the kids are in bed, Benny and Rachelle share a joint. Rachelle says that she's never going to smoke a joint again. Benny's response makes Rachelle mad. Finally, Benny tells her that they need to eat. The children need food and so does he. He points to his hair loss. Rachelle says that eating vegetables doesn't lead to hair loss. She looked it up on the Internet. Benny can't believe what he's hearing. Now he is high and hungry. He's thinking about escaping to McDonalds when he hears a scream. He and Rachelle follow the sound and find Emily on the ground. She had been trying to get out of the house and fell. Benny hopes that Rachelle realizes that she has to change her behavior.

Analysis

Mortality serves as a dominant theme in this section. In the chapter Edie, 241 pounds, Robin finds out about the death of one of her friends. The whole sequence of events makes Robin anxious. She throws a fit as she attempts to change Edie's mind to let her go to the hospital to see her friend before he died. As Robin and Edie talk about the death, she nervously eats cookies. And she worries about what will happen to her now that one friend is dead and the other one is in a mental hospital. And this anxiety leads to self discovery on Robin's part. Up till now, she's been fat. But on this day, she realizes that she has to change. She starts by dramatically getting rid of her old habits by throwing up the cookies she had been eating. The morning after the boy's funeral, she starts jogging and it's not long before she joins the track club. The boy's death initiates another change in Robin. It marks the end of the close relationship she had experienced with Edie.

Benny faces his mortality when he starts losing his hair. He wonders what will happen to him next and his thoughts turn to old age and death. As it did with Robin, the consideration of his mortality makes Benny anxious. He rushes to the doctor to find out what's wrong with him. In turn, his anxiety leads to self awareness. He admits to himself that his family doesn't communicate and that it's stress that causing his hair loss. He had rejected that cause before going to the doctor. He goes to talk to his father not just about his hair loss, but to try and understand why he has left Edie. Afterwards he feels relief as he realizes several things. He admits to himself that being his father had become his worse nightmare and he was happy to discover that he hadn't become that



person. He also realizes that this was "the end of the line" for him and his father and that he now had to step up and figure out life on his own. He even considers confronting his father, but then decides that his father wasn't worth the fight that would follow. Benny realizes that this makes him sad, but he would deal with those feelings some other time.

When Benny gets home he even stands up to Rachelle. After dinner he dumps the leftovers as he declares to himself that he's not having it for lunch the next day. He gives her an attitude when she says that she's not smoking pot anymore and he tells her that he and the kids are hungry. They are physically hungry because of the diet forced on them by Rachelle, but they are also emotionally hungry because ever since she started on the crusade to save Edie, Rachelle has just exhibited power and aggression. The family needed love.

Benny's family faces mortality again that evening when Emily falls from the window. Faced with the possibility that she could have died, Benny hopes that Rachelle herself has had the revelation that she needs to start behaving differently.

Since the beginning of the novel, when Benny didn't want to know about and avoided issues, either placing them on his wife's shoulders or his father's, Benny has changed.

The thought of Edie's mortality has drawn the family to her side and Robin faces it head on as she watches Edie eat at the Golden Unicorn. But this time it causes her to open up to her mother instead of turning away from her. Edie still keeps her feelings to herself, crying quietly. But Robin opens up. She admits that she is what she is ("Don't try to make me feel bad for being me"), she tells her mother that she doesn't want her to die and she says that she is there for her now.

In essence, Robin has come full circle in her relationship-with-her-mother journey. The death of her friend caused her to alienate herself from Edie. Now her mother's own mortality is bringing her closer to Edie, and she's seeing a side of her that she had forgotten existed.

Robin is also going through another journey -- this one leading towards opening herself up to the love associated with romantic relationships. Readers experience evidence of this journey in the chapter, 'Exodus'. It's fitting that she moves forward in her journey during a celebration of the journey that the Jewish people took as they were released from slavery and left Egypt. In a sense, the evening releases Robin's emotional chains. She starts emotionally letting herself have feelings for Daniel, something's that she had been reluctant to do even though everyone else knew they were a couple.

The evening at Daniel's house also explores the theme of family and relationships. Robin tries to escape her home and her religion. Daniel, on the other hand, embraces both. Yet on the surface Daniel's household seems to have more turmoil than hers. His great aunt openly criticizes his mother in front of other family members and guests. Daniel's mother lets her husband know how she feels about it and they do it where there's a possibility that they could be overheard. Robin's family, on the other hand, doesn't communicate. The lack of communication may make the family look perfect on



the surface, but it's like a wooden house being eaten by termites. Daniel's family fights, but they are happy and they raised a happy and calm son who loves his family.

Another chapter in this section explores the theme of love as well as family and relationships. That chapter is the Golden Unicorn. Edie has found a second home and even family there. And this home is similar to the one she grew up in. She is there helping those in need much as her father did. Kenneth makes his food with love and feeds it to Edie because he loves her. His motto could almost be, "Food was made of love, and love was made of food, and if it could stop Edie from being sad, there was nothing wrong with that either."

Discussion Question 1

Why did Robin tell Daniel that his parents had a fight?

Discussion Question 2

Why do you think Robin finds it hard to admit that she loves Daniel?

Discussion Question 3

If the owners of the Chinese restaurant care so much about Eide, why do they allow her to eat so much?

Vocabulary

alcove, imperceptibly, flustered, brisket, plague, devised, rendition, compromises, obligations, eternity, methodical, forlornly, banalities, enumerated, punkish, disdain, irrelevant, condescending, preposterous, cantor, vengefully, simultaneously



Section 4, pp. 164-224

Summary

In the chapter, Edie 332 pounds, it's the night before Edie's first surgery. Benny is staying overnight at his parent's house to drive her to the hospital because Richard has to go to the pharmacy in the morning to sign for some deliveries.

Edie can't sleep. She's thinking about food, but she's not supposed to eat. She gets out of bed and goes downstairs to the kitchen. When she gets there she finds Benny. He's been waiting for her. He asks her if she's thirsty. She pretends that she is. The two talk about Benny's children and then she asks him why he's up. He admits that he was there to remind her that she has to have an empty stomach before the surgery. She claims that she was just getting water and he says he was just reading a book. He does the same thing before her second surgery.

The chapter, 'The Walking Wounded,' begins with Emily and Edie walking slowly around a high school track. Neither of them is happy but they are following Rachelle's plan to get Edie healthy. Benny drives by and jokes with them about it. When he leaves, Emily and Edie discuss his hair loss. Edie tells Emily that the family's gene pool is strong and that nobody is bald. Then she tells Emily the story of how her grandfather (Edie's father) made it from Ukraine to the U.S. eating only one potato. She emphasizes that even after that he still had a full head of hair.

Neither woman knows what's wrong with Benny. They decide that their exercise has made them hungry. Edie takes Emily to the Chinese restaurant. Robin is already there. Seeing Emily with Edie surprises Robin. She had thought that she and her mother were going to discuss some things. Emily says that they can talk in front of her. Robin questions the wisdom of that and Edie sends Emily to the bathroom to wash her hands. When Emily returns, she catches Robin putting an envelope in her bag. Emily asks about it, but Edie gives a vague response. Emily won't let the subject drop and asks whether there's a family secret. The subject quickly changes to the food on the menu.

Emily only wants one thing, but her grandmother tries to entice her to get more. Robin comes to Emily's rescue when Edie says that she should eat more than one thing.

Anna comes to take the orders and Edie introduces her to Emily. Emily thinks that it's strange to be introduced to a waitress. She decides to compliment Anna on her nails. Anna offers to get a bottle of the fingernail polish for her.

The food arrives and Edie eats and eats and eats. Emily doesn't eat much because watching her grandmother eat was beginning to make her sick. She realizes that Robin feels the same way.



Anna, though, didn't have a problem with all the food Edie ate. After dinner, Anna brings the nail polish to Emily. Emily paints her nails and Robin announces that she and Edie are going to talk about Edie's health. The thought of Edie's health makes everyone cry.

They all take a deep breath and Robin opens one of the folders. It contains brochures of places Edie could go to lose weight. Edie says that she isn't going to leave her family. Next Robin pulls out some information about a nutritionist. Edie shuts that idea down as well.

The conversation becomes too much for Emily. She asks what's in the other folder. It has information about weight loss surgery. After looking at this folder, Robin and Emily plead for Edie to stop. She promises to read the information. They go to meet Kenneth. The two kiss. Emily realizes that her grandmother isn't going anywhere and she isn't going to stop eating Chinese food.

'Middlestein in Love' is from Richard's perspective. He has a girlfriend. Her name is Beverly, she's British, and a widow in her late 50s. She suggests that he write a letter to Rachelle asking to see his grandchildren. It works and Rachelle invites Richard to the b'nai mitzvah. Beverly also suggests that he take the kids to Friday night services. He poses the question to Rachelle who later comes back and says it's okay.

Richard and the children go to the synagogue on Friday night. When they arrive they sit in a prominent position near the front. His friends are sitting behind them. During the service, Emily and Josh start texting. Their action shocks Richard. Trying not to draw attention to the situation, he tries to get the children to put their phones away. Josh complies, but Emily tells him that she's not finished yet and jerks Richard's hand off hers. All of this embarrasses Richard. He catches his old friends giving disapproving glances. He starts thinking of Beverly. Emily starts coughing and his thoughts turn to Edie.

Once the services are over, he rushes the two children outside. The atmosphere outside of the synagogue almost makes him forgive the children for their actions. But then Emily says that she is glad the services are over. Richard says that she's lucky that he doesn't take them back in to talk to the rabbi.

Emily responds that they didn't want to come anyway. Josh tries to get her to be quiet. She tells him to shut up. An angry Richard goes to the car, gets in, and waits for Emily and Josh. Josh gets in first. Emily sits in the front seat and continues to be defiant.

Richard remembers a similar incident with Robin. In the end he had smacked her. When they got home, Robin had run into the house. Edie had come out wanting to know what had happened. Richard had told her that Robin was crying because he had slapped her. Edie had criticized Richard and had gone to soothe Robin.

Emily realizes that she's gone too far. Josh apologizes. Emily shows that she's sorry by telling Richard that they had had to miss a birthday party to come to the services. They had wanted to go to the party instead.



When Emily complains that she's tired of going to the synagogue, Richard tells her that one day she'll miss the time when going to synagogue was the worst thing in her life. Emily gives a sarcastic come back and Richard almost hits her, but manages to control himself. Everyone is silent on the way home. When they arrive, the twins rush out of the car. Benny comes out to find out how the evening went. Richard doesn't tell Benny about the problems he had faced. Instead, they talk about the laser party the kids had missed.

Benny and Richard share a joint. Then Benny tells his father that Edie will be bringing a date to the b'nai mitzvah. The news shocks Richard. Benny tells him that he can bring someone as well. Richard instantly thinks of Beverly. He leaves Benny, calls Beverly, and asks her whether he can come over. They meet and talk. He convinces her that he's ready to take their relationship to the next level. They go to her house and sleep together.

Analysis

The first chapter in this section, Edie, 332 Pounds, focuses on two main themes -- society and family and relationships. In the chapter, readers learn how the law firm Edie had worked for treated her because of her weight. Forcing her into early retirement because she is overweight is pure discrimination and it shows how society values the way one looks more than the contribution people make. The evidence that this is what the partner-owners did is that they offered Edie such a good deal just to keep her mouth shut. The act also makes a commentary on how the younger generation approaches business and how older people who may have more traditional values sometimes don't fit in with the new rulers of society. The narration makes the point that the people who pushed Edie out are the children of the people who had originally hired her. It's true that when she was first hired she was thinner, but the mention of who decided to let her go implies that maybe the older generation would have kept her on due to the contribution she was making to the firm.

Edie's situation is also a commentary on how fat people are treated. Robin is a teacher who drinks too much, but she still has her job. Benny smokes pot, but he is still successful. As long as one's addictions are hidden, it's okay, but do not display them to the world. Do not let the public see that you have no self control.

Trying to fit into society's norms can be exhausting and Edie is truly feeling the effects. Throughout her life she's checked everything off society's success list. She works for a good law firm, she got married to a good Jewish businessman, and she had two children, a boy and a girl who in turn were contributing to society. But this was not her definition of success and it was killing her.

As a result of her overeating, Edie has to have two surgeries and in this chapter. Benny's actions show that even in dysfunctional families, family ties can triumph. Once again readers see the unconditional love that a child gives their parents. Richard is not there for Edie before either surgery. For the first one, he has to go to the pharmacy so



he can't take her to the hospital. He has already left her. But then Richard is only her husband. He's not her flesh and blood. Benny is, and he stands in to make sure that his mother's surgery goes well. Edie has problems accepting his actions because she feels as if she has failed. But, Benny respects his mother and feels that she loved him, so he was there for her, much in the same way he had thought of making a necklace for her when he was a child.

'The Walking Wounded' uses the track as a symbol of the circle of life. Here are different generations -- grandmother and granddaughter walking in a circle. The grandmother faces death while the granddaughter has her entire life before her. The track also serves to show the validity of the statement, "You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink." Robin had turned to running and the track to make a change. At that time Edie and done nothing. Now the track is there for her, but she has no interest in it. After doing her walks she either drinks with Robin or eats, which negates any progress she may have made.

This chapter focuses on the theme of the loss of innocence and how being faced with mortality influences Emily. She actually had a list of things she was discovering that sucked. She's been forced to deal with her grandmother's health, the upcoming divorce of her grandparents, her mother's intensification of her control-freak nature, and her father's hair loss. As a result she was no longer a sweet innocent child. She was turning into a hater. She was beginning to know what the real world was like, and there was no going back. As it did with Robin, facing mortality and things that suck manifests itself in her relationship with her mother and she alienates herself from her.

Readers find out that she also embarks on a journey to Brooklyn later in life, but hers turns out to be more successful than Robin's, at least from what readers know from the element of foreshadowing.

Another societal theme is raised when Edie introduces Emily to Anna. Emily sees her as just a waitress and wonders why Edie is introducing the two to each other. This shows the snobbery that exists in today's economy. People are not seen as people. They are defined by their jobs. Why should anyone bother to speak to those who are beneath them? What makes this situation ironic and adds to the commentary is the fact that Anna is not just a waitress. The lesson here is the same as that at the beginning of the section. People should stop judging people based on their appearance.

Love is the theme exposed in 'Middlestein in Love' as Richard finds his new mate. In the end he doesn't meet her over the Internet which leads to the question, can you really find love over the Internet, or is it better to do it through the more traditional route --either through people you know or actually dating people you've met exploring a common interests? But in the same way people have their checklist when looking for matches on the Internet, Richard still goes down the list to make sure she's acceptable according to society's rules. In Beverly he finds a less pushy, calmer Edie. She suggests and he follows. And this raises the question, can one really ever divorce themselves from their first love if they leave them, but never stop loving them?



Beverly even notices that Richard has not divorced himself from Edie. She says that he's not available. He says he is and the two move forward, but is it really love or are both of them just lonely and settling for the best option that comes along? Is this the best one can expect the second time around?

Has Edie done better with Kenneth? Everyone recognizes how much he loves her and even Emily realizes that Edie isn't going anywhere and she wouldn't either if a man looked at her and treated her the way Kenneth treated Edie. Could the fact that she never really loved Richard make her more open to love the second time around?

The two relationships blossoming at nearly the same time make for an easy comparison.

This same chapter explores the theme of family and relationships as a grandfather tries to deal with grandchildren in the digital age. Richard does seem to have learned a bit since dealing with Robin at about the same age as Emily and Josh. He doesn't hit Emily and he doesn't relay their actions to Benny. Instead, he tries to show Benny that he has connected with the kids (by knowing about the laser park).

Discussion Question 1

Do Richard and Beverly settle for each other or do you think they truly love each other? What support do you have for your opinion?

Discussion Question 2

Should older people expect new generations to abide by their code of behavior and traditions, or should older generations try to adjust to new ways? Support your opinion.

Discussion Question 3

Why do you think Edie agrees to walk around the track even though she hates doing it?

Vocabulary

tussle, paltry, shimmer, tepidly, pestilence, emanated, accordion, tucking, intercepted, gulp, revered, intentions, blatantly, estranged, brassy, contemplative, subtler, ire, embossed, cantor



Section 5, pp. 225-272

Summary

The chapter 'Seating Chart' is written from the perspective of the Middlestein's old friends, the Cohns, the Grodsteins, the Weinmanns, and the Frankens. They all sit together at the shul and at the party. Edie is there with Kenneth, but they don't know his name because nobody introduces him to them. The same is true of Beverly. At the party, they criticize the decoration on the table and end up putting it under the table in an attempt to make things better. They don't go over to Edie and Richard because they don't know which table to go to. They witness Edie throwing a roll in Richard's direction. It bounces off his chair and Beverly leaves soon afterwards.

Edie realizes that her old friends are watching her and goes over to talk to them. They find Edie delightful. Edie returns to her table and the twins perform their dance. Afterwards a video appears showing a collection of scenes of when the kids were babies. A younger and thinner Edie appears with Richard, each holding one of the twins. Their friends wonder what had happen to that Edie and that Richard. The rooms becomes silent.

The friends order more drinks, people in the room recover, and the video continues with more pictures of the kids as they grew up. During an intermission between the video and the candle-lighting ceremony, Carly appears demanding to know what had happen to Edie and what they were going to do about it. They tell her that they aren't responsible for Edie. She needs to talk to Richard.

After dessert, Rachelle comes over to talk to them. They say that it was a lovely party and pretend that they do know where the shoes are that they had put under the table. The friends stay for one more dance and then leave. Outside, they overhear Edie and Richard fighting.

The next chapter, 'Sprawl', is from Kenneth's perspective. He feels bad for leaving Edie at the party, but had had to go to work. After the restaurant's guests have gone, he starts to prepare dinner for Edie and himself. When Anna comes in the kitchen she realizes that he is preparing food for Edie. He feels guilty that he's been ignoring his daughter and asks whether she wants some food, too. Then he thanks her for all she's done for him. The two embrace and cry. Then Anna goes home. He continues to cook and then takes the food to Edie's house. He lets himself in and goes to the kitchen. He finds the freezer door open. Edie is on the floor, dead.

'Middlestein in Mourning' looks at Edie's shiva from Richard's perspective. It is at Benny's house and he is attending as a guest. He finds that he can't stop eating. As he eats he watches Benny, Emily, Robin, and Daniel. Robin gives him a dark stare and then starts a fight with Rachelle, saying that Richard shouldn't be there. She says that she's an orphan now. When Richard hears her say that, he thinks that she is going to



regret making that statement. The narrator uses foreshadowing to let readers know that she does not regret saying that during his lifetime. When he dies, however, she can't stop crying at his funeral.

Rachelle defends his right to be there. Robin goes outside, Benny joins her. The two share a joint.

Rachelle apologizes to Richard for Robin's behavior. He tells her that she has nothing to be sorry for. Then the two talk about the food. Josh has decorated the desert tray to look like a smiley face. Rachelle gathers the cookies and takes them outside and offers them to Benny, Robin, and Daniel. She even eats one herself. Richard leaves without saying goodbye. In the front yard, he finds Emily crying. He hugs her and she accepts it.

Analysis

In this section readers get a view of society, represented by the old family friends, the Cohns, the Grodsteins, the Weinmans, and the Frankens. Their viewpoint plays an essential role in the Middlestein story because it shows how the family looked and how it now looks from the outside. And that view is the story -- that no matter how a family looks from the outside, things can be quite different on the inside. Until Edie and Richard separated, the view of the family was so different that the friends wondered if they ever knew the two of them at all. And that is the point. They didn't know what was going on inside the family.

There is something else that this chapter shows about society and friends. Everyone wants to know what's going on but they don't necessarily want to get involved. Everyone got new suits and dresses, lost weight, and did whatever they had to do to look good in public. And then they observed, but didn't even go to say hello to Edie or Richard. Their excuse was that they didn't know which table to go to. And when Carly comes to them and asks them why they haven't helped Edie and how they were going to help her, they say that Edie isn't their responsibility. But when Edie comes to them, and later Rachelle does the same, the group is all smiles and praise.

Friends are also quick to criticize. The friends criticize the decoration on their table, They even make a little dig at the Hilton. It is new, no it is "newish." One never knows what friends are thinking, they smile in your face, as they do with Rachelle, but talk about you behind your back. (Rachelle looked good, but not nearly as good as Carly. The friends made the table look better by taking the dancing shoes off.)

The chapter looks at reasons friends may be this way. It could be because they are afraid to face the problems of their friends because there is nothing they could do for their friends that they don't need to do for themselves. Seeing what others are going through makes people think of their own lives and the fact that the same can happen to them, or may already be happening. When the friends go home, they are happy that they aren't Edie and Richard.



Still, trying to look perfect in the eyes of society is important. It's important enough that Rachelle tries to put on the perfect b'nai mitzvah in spite of the family's problems. And the family tries to put on a good face. But their dirty laundry is out. Everyone sees the Middlestein's new configuration. Through the video they see how much the family has changed. One can go crazy trying to keep up appearances. Rachelle tries to control everything to make things perfect. There are things that she was not able to control (getting pregnant for instance) so now she tries her best. But in the end, it's too much. Control does not lead to perfection and happiness.

Following society's rules does not always lead to happiness. Readers see evidence of this in the relationship between Edie and Kenneth, a Jewish woman and a Chinese man. Edie followed the rules with Richard, but was not happy. In 'Sprawl' readers learn more about Kenneth and can see how he differs from Richard and how his marriage differed from that of Richard's and Edie's. The difference probably shows itself the most in the fact that Anna is still there to help her father and never ran away as Robin had done and Emily will later do.

There are also parallels to Edie's parents. Kenneth and his wife had loved each other and their love had shown through food. And even though Kenneth felt lonely after Marie's death, he, like Edie's father, had not rushed out to find new love. He had been alone for eight years before meeting Edie. Before then it had just been him and his daughter, just as it had been Edie and her father.

Another comparison to Richard appears in this chapter. Kenneth has the unconditional love of his daughter. He thanks her for all she's done for him. He's found love with women twice, once with Marie and the second time with Edie. In all of his relationships he reaches out and gives love. It's unfortunate that these women leave his life, but he has felt and knows what it is to give love

Richard, on the other hand, is still learning. He has reached out to achieve something that looks like love with Beverly. However he doesn't really extend himself until the end of the book when he reaches out and hugs Emily. He had always joked with his own kids, but never really gave of himself. He even left the room when Robin, at about the same age as Emily, started to disagree with him. After the experience at the synagogue, the old Richard might have simply seen Emily like the other members of his family. He even noticed how Emily looks and acts like everyone except for him. But Richard has grown. At the funeral he understands the solace Edie had found in food. He even has good thoughts about Rachelle. Earlier in the book he criticized her, but now he has something to thank her for (coming to his defense against Robin).

Rachelle also shows growth and her letting go of her tight control and trying to keep up appearances helps bond the family. She "restores order, at least in small part on Middlestein's behalf." This is the same woman who had banned him from the house earlier in the novel. And as her final act, she uses junk food, cookies, as a peace offering to her husband and her sister-in-law and Daniel joins them, a sign that he is part of the family.



Discussion Question 1

What qualities do Edie and Kenneth share? How do these qualities contribute to their relationship?

Discussion Question 2

Why are Emily and Richard able to find a bond that keeps them close for years while he is not able to do the same with his own children?

Discussion Question 3

Do you think the Cohns, the Grodsteins, the Weinmans, and the Frankens were real friends? Why or why not? What about Carly? Is it possible to find better friends than these or is this the best one can expect in life? Support your answer.

Vocabulary

schlub, haftorahs, heralded, atrium, krump, demurred, configuration, sublime, channeling, infused, ringers, enamored, sprawled, entitled, estranged, kugels, shiva, mesmerized, stricken, muster



Characters

Edie Middlestein (maiden name Herzen)

Edie is the novel's central character and protagonist. Five years old when the narration first introduces her, she is the only child of a Jewish couple. Her father was from Ukraine and had almost starved during his journey to Chicago. As a result, he ate a lot of food and guarded it like an animal, but he never gained weight. The United States was the birthplace of Edie's mother. She had not suffered the same hardships as Edie's father, and thus didn't feel as she had to eat as if it was her last meal. Still, the couple shared one common view of food. "Food was made of love" and they could never deny themselves or Edie anything that was made of love. And even though Edie's mother knows that she is too big for her age, she cannot deny her food. This attitude defines Edie's entire life.

When the reader meets Edie as an adult, she is suffering from life-threatening diabetes. She's about to have an operation to put a stent in her leg. The doctors have already performed the same procedure on her other leg. On top of that, her husband, Richard, has just left her. Realizing that she needs help, her children (and daughter-in-law) rally to help her. But while others are intent on saving her and her doctor tells her that she's killing herself, she can't stop eating.

The root of Edie's problem lies in her disappointment in herself. She loved and admired her father who helped Russian immigrants and translated Russian poetry into English just for fun. In contrast, she thinks she has failed. She had married too young, she had children who she found boring, and she worked for a law firm that helped corporations set up businesses in strip malls. Nobody could fill the emptiness in her. But she continued to look for comfort in food. And even that fails at times. But using food to comfort her was an inbred reaction, and she continued to turn to it.

Overall, Edie's story of addiction applies to anyone with any addiction. Others may try to help, but habits do not change unless the person with the addiction decides to change themselves. And even though her daughter and granddaughter plead for her to stop, her doctor tells her she needs to stop, and her daughter-in-law launches a plan to improve her health, Edie's vision of herself as a failure overrules.

Richard Middlestein

Richard Middlestein is Edie's husband, the father of Robin and Benny and the grandfather of Emily and Josh. Edie is not his first choice of a wife. That title belongs to Carly, Edie's neighbor during law school. He dared to ask Carly out even though she was engaged, and Carly turned him down, offering up Edie as a conciliation prize. Richard wanted to meet an intelligent Jewish woman and Carly convinced Edie that she needed to find a husband. Carly then set up a blind date between the two.



Richard and Edie met on the night that Edie was expecting her father's medical test results. Her wish to change the date's location and time created a disagreement between the two of them. Richard saw the episode as part of them getting to know each other. The skirmish ended with him in charge when he had pizzas delivered to her father's hospital room and kept the sick man laughing.

Richard is not able to repeat this feat during his married life with Edie. She belittles him, and finally he leaves her right before her second leg surgery. He knows that Edie hasn't loved him for a long time and that he can't do anything to save her, so he decides to leave before it's too late for him to find love again.

His actions cause his children to rally to their mother's side and turn against him. They don't see how he could leave a sick woman. He also has to explain himself to his friends. He sees things differently. He maintains that he has a right to be happy and he hadn't experienced happiness with Edie for a long time and never would again.

On his own, he starts trying to find a new companion through the Internet. At first he looks for women who are younger than he is. But with the exception of finding someone he has good sex with, his dates end in disaster. Finally, he does find someone who hears about him from a friend and with her, he finds something that resembles love.

Still, Richard never really stops loving Edie, and with the exception of his granddaughter, Emily, never receives forgiveness for his action from his family.

Robin Middlestein

Robin is Edie's and Richard's daughter. She is a teacher who fled Chicago and worked for Teach for America. The whole experience disillusioned her and she moved back to Chicago. She was a rebel as a child and has a tough exterior. As the narrative advances she lets her neighbor and friend, Daniel, see her softer side and the two get married.

After her father leaves Edie, Robin reluctantly participates in the family's efforts to care for her mother. She never forgives her father during his lifetime for leaving Edie. Her hatred goes so deep that not only does she not invite him to her wedding, she doesn't even tell him that she is getting married.

Rachelle Middlestein

Rachelle is Edie's and Richard's daughter-in-law. She's married to Benny and is the mother of twins, Emily and Josh. A perfectionist, Rachelle is in the midst of planning the twin's b'nai mitzvah when Richard leaves Edie before her second leg surgery. She instantly turns against Richard, banning him from her family's life and takes it upon herself to lead the plan to restore Edie's health.

As a side effect of her efforts, junk food becomes public enemy number one and she tries to eradicate it from everyone's life, driving everyone away from her.



When the narration ends, she makes peace at Edie's funeral by serving cookies to family members gathered in the backyard. Neither Richard, nor her daughter Emily are present to receive the cookies.

Benny Middlestein

Benny is Edie's and Richard's son, Robin's older brother, and the father of Emily and Josh. He's been there to support his mother during both of her surgeries to the extent that he has guarded the kitchen at night to ensure that she doesn't eat prior to the operations. However, the stress of having to deal with the separation of his parents, his wife's reaction to it all, a rebellious daughter, and his mother's overall health is too much for him. His nightly joint isn't even enough to help. His stress manifests itself in the loss of his hair.

His reaction to his father leaving Edie isn't as strong as Robin's and Rachelle's, but he does realize that becoming his father is his worse nightmare.

Emily Middlestein

Emily is Benny and Rachelle's daughter, Josh's twin and the granddaughter of Edie and Richard. She is turning 13 and rebelling in the same way Robin had done at her age. She gets along with Edie and Robin though and resembles them in character. Throughout the novel, she is trying to figure out life and how she fits in. By the end of the narration, she is the only immediate family member who is close to Richard.

Josh Middlestein

Josh is Benny's and Rachelle's son., Emily's twin and the granddaughter of Edie and Richard. He personally resembles that of the Middlestein men-- quite and giving in to the Middlestein women. He, like Emily, is confused about life and his role, but he doesn't let his confusion show until Edie's funeral.

Daniel

At the beginning of the narration, Daniel is Robin's quiet and understanding neighbor and friend. As the story progresses he becomes her boyfriend and then her husband. In general, he lets her control the relationship, but he stands up to her when he really wants something. He tends to get his way. He is also Jewish, but unlike Robin embraces his religion. And while his family is not without strife, his home is a place to go to, not run away from.



Beverly

Beverly becomes Richard's second wife. She is supportive of him in the same way that Daniel is supportive of Robin. And while she gives him advice that helps him deal with his family, she is not overbearing or critical as Edie had been.

Kenneth Song

Kenneth is the owner of the Chinese restaurant that Edie frequents. She also helps both Kenneth and his daughter Anna with the business aspects of the restaurant. He turns out to be Edie's second chance to find love. He is the one who discovers Edie's corpse.



Symbols and Symbolism

Food

Food for Edie's parents and Kenneth is a life-giving form of nourishment. For Edie it is a replacement for love and a way to escape pain. Eating is her search for comfort, love, and understanding.

Edie Eating at Restaurants Alone

Eating meals together is a bonding experience. An unpleasant meal with others is a bad sign. Edie's eating alone goes beyond just a failed meal. It shows the lack of bonding with her family and just how dysfunctional it is.

Rachelle Serving the Cookies at the End of the Novel

These cookies serve as a peace offering and a way to bring her closer to the family members. It is important that she serves them cookies and not something healthy, as her obsession with health food has been driving everyone crazy. She is finally feeding her hungry husband.

The Necklace Benny Makes and Gives to Edie

The necklace is a symbol of unconditional love. Edie admits that she finds the children boring at times and feels that having kids has contributed to her failure. Still, her child loves her enough to make her a necklace and tells her that she's pretty because in his eyes she is.

Track

The track represents the circle of life. Different generations walk around it together - Edie and Robin, Edie and Emily. Only the women, who can give birth, walk around it.

The track also symbolizes the saying that you can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink. People take Edie to the track, but as she is not ready to make a change, it does no good. Robin, on the other hand, used the track to transform herself when she was ready. No one was there to lead her.

Marijuana

Benny smokes marijuana as a form of escape. He shares it with Rachelle, whom he loves. When things begin to go bad between them, she rejects it and he doesn't care.



Chicago Suburbs

Just how typical the Middlesteins are is represented by the fact that they live in the suburbs of Chicago. There are no "strange" people here -- just typical Midwestern families.

Fast Food Restaurants

These eating places represent the emptiness Edie feels. She goes there to feed the emptiness.

Invitations in Drawer

These invitations symbolize how people want to be show off to others in society. At the same time the people who they want to show off with have better things to do. But people play games and aren't honest with each other. Instead of just saying no to them, Pierre leads them on. Rachelle realizes this has happened to her when she sees the invitations in the drawer after she has extended the same type of invitation.

B'nai Mitzvah

This symbolizes a loss of innocence for both Emily and Josh. They are both moving into adulthood and are beginning to know about life and its realities. The fact that it takes place during a period of family turmoil symbolizes the need to keep up appearances even when things are falling apart.



Settings

Chicago Suburbs

The story takes place in Chicago, but in reality it could be any suburban area with a Jewish community. That's because the Middlesteins are an ordinary family trying to make sense out of their lives.

Benny's and Rachelle's Backyard

Benny takes care of his family, but retreats to his backyard with Rachelle when the kids are in bed to relax and take care of himself. This is a place of peace for him. And in the end, it is the backyard where the family comes together after Edie's death.

Fast Food Restaurants

Edie goes from fast food restaurant to fast food restaurant trying to find fulfillment in the food they serve.

The Chinese Restaursnt

Here Edie finds some form of fulfillment. She uses her business and legal sense to help Kenneth and Anna manage the business side of the restaurant and here the food is made of love and love is made of food.

Robin's Neighborhood Bar

Robin turned away from food, but she has another addiction -- alcohol. Just as Benny unwinds in his backyard, she unwinds in the neighborhood bar.



Themes and Motifs

Family and Relationships

It is Edie's eating problem and subsequent weight that draws the family together, but the story is about more than Edie and her health issues. The title is *The Middlesteins* because the novel is about the entire family and throughout the novel the theme of family and relationships constantly appears.

The novel highlights relationships between both husbands and wives and parents and their children as well as the results of the violation of the natural law of the family in favor of man's law.

Readers first meet a young Edie, her mother, and her father. This family unit follows the natural law of families. The narrator states that her mother and father didn't agree on a lot of things that man's law of the family deems to be necessary for couple compatibility. They were from different countries, had different views on how to spend money, and went to different synagogues. But in those things adhering to nature's law -- food, sex, and loving one's child -- there was no disagreement. And even though it is here that Edie picks up her warped relationship with food, her parents were happy together, Edie was close to both of them, her father didn't remarry when her mother died, and Edie stayed close to him until he died and always held him in high esteem.

Kenneth Song's family of three also thrived on the natural law of the family. Kenneth and Marie functioned as a team that fit naturally together. He was a chef. She had business sense. Her father financed their venture and the couple loved their daughter, Anna, and she loved them. And, as was the case with Edie, Anna continued to look after her father after her mother died. Kenneth did not remarry after Marie's death.

When Kenneth falls in love with Edie, the natural law of the family is once more at play. Their connection is nature's nourishment, food, and like the union between Edie's parents, the couple may not connect based on man's law of the family, but they do so based on nature's law. The two care about the business and they have the same love of nature's nourishment, food and sex, and they have the same sense of humor.

Edie's relationship with Richard, however, follows man's law of the family. He's ready to settle down with an intelligent Jewish girl and when he finds that his first choice is already taken, he quickly settles for the conciliation prize, Edie. In turn, Edie marries Richard because her friend Carly said that she should try to find a husband, set her up on the blind date, and Richard was the first one to ask for hand in marriage.

Man's law of the family plants the seeds for what turns into a dysfunctional family. And the roots grow as Richard and Edie continue to build a family around man's law of the family. She has what outsiders view as a good job. He is a respected pharmacist. The couple has two children, a boy and a girl, who in turn become respected contributors to



society. Robin, their daughter, is a teacher who has worked for Teach for America. Benny, their son, is a respected accountant with a stay-at-home wife and twins, a boy and a girl. All of them, with the exception of Robin, live in the Chicago suburbs. But Richard and Edie have a sexless marriage and the family doesn't even share the bond of food. When they go out to eat, it is so common for Edie to eat separately that her children think that their family's eating arrangement is normal.

The extent of just how dysfunctional the Middlestein family is appears early in the book. At the beginning of the novel, Robin doesn't even know which of her mother's legs is being operated on.

Benny wants to shift responsibility to talking with his mother about her teeth to his wife, Rachelle, and then to his father.

Richard commits the biggest sin against the natural family, though, by leaving Edie when she's sick and placing his needs first. By breaking the natural law of the family, he places himself in exile. His attempt to find love based on man's law fails. Only when he moves toward nature's law does he find something resembling love with Beverly. He finally finds a true bond when he reaches out to Emily at the end of the novel. The narrator states that the only thing people could see that they had in common was being family. That is the point. He salvages a family relationship when he follows the natural law of the family -- the unconditional love of a grandfather towards his granddaughter.

Throughout all of this, Edie manages to follow nature's law of the family. She finds it hard to play with the children and she is a frustrated mother, yet the children feel her love. She has the love of a mother for her children.

Benny realizes this fact at an early age and is always there for Edie when it counts. He is there both nights before her operations to make sure she doesn't eat during the night. Since he follows nature's law of the family, he's able to turn an unplanned pregnancy into a lasting marriage and raise children who love him. Even Emily admits that she loves her father. Her relationship with her mother is rocky because when it comes to the children, Rachelle follows man's law of the family.

Robin was close to her mother, but rejected nature's family law when her friend died. As she gets closer to Edie, though, she herself is able to build a romantic relationship.

Love

How important is love in a marriage? When faced with a challenge, what do you owe someone you spent your life with? Are people entitled to love? Is it better to be with someone than to be alone even if that person isn't the perfect match? Can people find love the second time around? The novel explores all of these questions.

People assume that love and marriage go together. But in the novel readers come to know couples whose matches did not form from love. One such marriage is Edie's and



Richard's. Edie regrets marrying Richard. She feels that she married too young and he never measured up to her father.

Richard looked for love from Edie, but never really offered it himself. Edie sees him as coming in as a talk show guest. He entertains, tells jokes, but never relates to Edie and the children on a deeper level. When he finally sees that he's not going to get the love he wants, he leaves his sick wife.

Is this okay? Does one have the right to find love before it is too late? Through their reactions, his family, friends, and dates say that it isn't. They believe that once a couple commits to marriage, they are supposed to stay together even in challenging times. Leaving goes against the natural law of husband and wife. But Richard thinks that he's entitled to love.

Benny's and Rachelle's marriage comes about due to an unplanned pregnancy. Yet, the two seem to make it work. And even when Rachelle's perfectionist nature becomes so overbearing that she's about to push Benny away, she realizes that he is hungry for the relationship they used to have and she feeds that hunger at the end of the novel.

Robin's relationship with Daniel starts like Edie's with Richard. While Edie's father was truly dying, Robin has killed her feelings for her father and chooses Daniel because he is there at the time. Daniel is not like Richard, though. He is there to give, not just to take, love. Thus as Robin moves closer to having the relationship with her mother that nature deems and begins to open up to Daniel, the two of them stand a better chance of having a loving relationship.

These couples show that people are not entitled to love as Richard seems to think they are. Instead they must work at it, give to others, and at times even ask for it. Benny tells Rachelle that he and the kids are hungry. Daniel constantly asks Robin whether it is possible for her to stop acting so tough and Richard finally learns that he must do the same. He must give of himself to Beverly if he wants her to stay.

The novel is full of characters looking for someone to love. But is it better to be alone than to be with someone who is not the right fit? The answer seems to depend on the person. Some stay single until they find the right partner. Daniel doesn't seem to be in a relationship until he and Robin start dating. But once he decides that she is the right person for him he's determined to keep her. Edie's father doesn't remarry and Kenneth stays single after his wife dies. His attraction to Edie is real and comes as a surprise. She is not there just to fill a hole. His story shows that one can find love a second time around.

In contrast to Kenneth's story, those participating in the Internet dating scene seem to want to fill a hole. In their case, being with someone is better than being alone, even if it is for a short period of time to meet a particular need, like Richard's relationship with Tracy.



Journey

Several journeys take place as the novel progresses. The main goal for the characters is to find the perfect place where they can find satisfaction. Encompassed in this quest is an even larger journey, the journey of life which is a journey that all of the characters are taking.

Robin's and Richard's stories exemplify the quest to find a place where one can be satisfied.

Robin's quest first takes her to Brooklyn. There she faced the challenges of dealing with at-risk children from poor urban areas. After a year she fled back to Chicago, but her journey wasn't over. Albeit reluctantly, she takes on the challenge of trying to restore her mother's health, and in doing so grows closer to Edie, her boyfriend, and her brother and his wife as exemplified at the end of the novel when she accepts the cookies. Her journey, as do many journeys, leads her back home. But not without first facing many obstacles like dealing her mother and her health problems, her religion, and learning to open her heart which could lead to pain, but is the only route she can take to find love.

Richard leaves Edie on a quest to find love. On the way he experiences the wrath of his family. He also must make his way through other obstacles -- those of middle-aged men trying to find love through the Internet. His quest finally leads him to a union with Beverly and even though the rest of his family continues to reject him, he returns home through his union with Emily.

Through the issue of Edie's health, readers see all of the characters navigating through the journey of life in the best way they know how. Readers meet Edie at a young age and through the narrator's lenses understand why she is disappointed in herself. Readers see Rachelle, whose life flew out of control when she became pregnant, go on her quest to bring satisfaction to herself and others by trying to create perfection. She also meets obstacles along the way. Benny doesn't seem to be interested in his mother's health, the kids are not able to dance well, the dance instructor is not sincere and neither are her book club members, and Emily rebels. In the end, though, she overcomes some of the obstacles and finds satisfaction with the adult members of the family.

Benny begins his journey of figuring out life and love when he realizes that his worse nightmare is to become what his father has become. This is when he stands up to Rachelle in her quest for perfection through control.

Loss of Innocence

Childhood is a time of innocence. Children live in a world protected by a lack of knowledge which is similar to someone living a germ-free bubble. For example, the young Benny and Robin have no idea that their parents are fighting at McDonalds. Edie even tells Richard that she hates him, but she does it in such a tone that Benny does



not understand what his mother has just said to his father. She also complains about having to do all of the work with the children. But Benny and Robin are in their childhood bubble of innocence. They have their food and toys. They are going to play with their father. They are happy. Their bubble even keeps them from realizing that it is not normal for a mother to eat separately from the rest of the family.

Once children become teenagers, however, the bubble begins to become porous. Knowledge begins to seep in. For some children the bubble may deflate at a slow pace as they move from childhood to the realities of adulthood. For others, either one or several defining moments may happen at the same time that causes the bubble to burst.

Readers see the bubble being removed from Robin's world when she starts high school. Kids make fun of her both her and Edie because of their weight. Edie has been overweight throughout Robin's childhood. But in the innocence of childhood, it didn't make a noticeable difference in her life. Now she is beginning to know. Still, Robin is able to patch up her bubble through her friendship with two boys from school. But it is only a temporary fix. Her innocence bubble finally bursts when she is faced with mortality -- the death of one of her friends. The other one is committed to a mental hospital. The bubble has burst. As a result, she clashes with Edie, the overpowering authority figure in her life who kept her from visiting her friend in the hospital. Later, she alienates herself from Edie. Throughout the novel, the narrator allows readers to see how she finally emerges to better understand herself, her mother, and gain a sense of identity.

The novel also features two other children who are currently emerging from their innocence bubble and these children are going through the coming-of-age celebration, the bar mitzvah. They are Emily and Josh and they are not only coming of age, they are also losing their innocence.

Like Robin, Emily and Josh are faced with mortality and a host of other issues. Both react as they start to know what being an adult is all about. Their personalities cause them to react in different ways.

Emily, whose personality is like Edie's and Robin's, is watching her grandmother eat herself to death, her grandparents getting divorced, her mother becoming even more controlling than she had been in the past, and her father losing his hair. As a result, she is becoming a self-proclaimed hater. Her growing awareness of the nature of humanity and its capacity for good and evil manifests itself in her relationship with her mother as it did with Robin. Rachelle represents an authority figure and her quest for perfection through control overpowers Emily. Emily's bubble has burst and now she knows about the things that suck, and there's no going back.

Josh is also undergoing the same stage in life. But unlike the hatred Emily feels, Josh is confused. He wonders whether his parents would love him just as much if he decided to become a dancer instead of a doctor. He hears his mother and father fighting and Benny giving in to Rachelle after she virtually throws a tantrum. He doesn't know how he feels about his grandmother's death or how he is supposed to feel. And he thinks



that making a smiling face with the food will make everyone feel better after attending Edie's funeral.

Circle of Life

Intertwined within the novel's other themes is that of "the circle of life" and it is one of the lessons the narrator leaves the reader with as the novel closes.

The circle of life encompasses a literal depiction of birth, reproduction, and death. But it also represents a more philosophical meaning -- the fact that people are influenced by and connected to each other and nature. The need for Robin to reconcile with her mother, for Benny to come to terms with how he feels about his father, for Edie to help others even when she can't help herself, the desire for Richard to find love, Rachelle's desire to create perfection via control, and the overall influence of nature's bounty, food, exemplifies the latter message. None of these people will be able to let go of their insecurities until they resolve relationship issues. For example, as Robin connects with Edie she's able to channel her anger and tough stance into a form of happiness that allows her to open up and form a relationship with Daniel.

The progression of the novel from Edie's early life to her death exemplifies the former notion. At the beginning of the novel, readers meet a young Edie and see how her personality and relationship to food are born. Her mother dies and she cares for her father until he dies. Edie is now left to establish her own family. When readers learn about present-day Edie, she's on the verge of death and her own children and grandchildren come to her side and care for her. The three generations, Edie, her children, and her grandchildren, represent the circle of life which is literally depicted by the track Edie, Robin, and Emily walk around.

The track not only depicts the literal circle of life, but it also represents Edie coming full circle with facing her weight. When Robin loses her innocence, she turns to the track to lose weight. At that time, Edie did nothing even though Robin has told her that her schoolmates call both of them fat. Robin throws up as a sign that she's done with being fat. Edie feels like doing the same, but doesn't. Now everything has come full circle and Robin is there to physically walk Edie around the track.

As Edie's story winds down, that of her children and grandchildren begins to emerge, representing how all of the characters are influenced by each other. They cannot grow alone, as they had existed before coming to Edie's aid. In essence her death gives birth to stronger family bonds. Rachelle defends Richard's right to be at the gathering after Edie's funeral. Richard always remembers that. Earlier in the novel, Richard had criticized Rachelle and Rachelle hadn't even wanted him to see his grandchildren or come to the house.

It's a new Middlestein beginning with a new family configuration. Daniel is now a member of the family. Rachelle starts off on a new footing with her husband, her sister-in-law and welcomes Daniel by offering them the very food she despised throughout the

novel and the caring everyone needs. Richard and Emily start a new relationship with each other. And Richard is now free from both an emotional and legal standpoint to marry Beverly and start his own new life.



Styles

Point of View

The narration uses two points of view. The author writes most of the novel from the third person perspective of Edie, family members, and people who enter their lives while they are trying to deal with Edie's health issues. The exception occurs in the chapter, 'Seating Chart'. In this chapter, the point of view switches to first-person plural. Both point of views serve to paint a portrait of a layered family whose members bring along their own insecurities and fears to the battle to save Edie.

Using a third-person multiple perspective technique effectively gives readers insight into the subjects of the Middlestein portrait. As the family members don't communicate their real feeling to each other, the only way readers can truly get to know them is to have someone else go into their heads. The perspective shifts weave the novel together much in the same way the family is woven together.

Seating Chart, the chapter that uses the first person plural, shows how outsiders see the family through the eyes of Edie's and Richard's old friends the Cohens, the Grodsteins, the Weinmans, and the Frankens. The friends are shocked to see how Edie and Richard treat each other, but at the same time they are sympathetic. Mainly they are happy not to be them.

Language and Meaning

The use of language in "The Middlesteins" is relatively simple and in the range of young adults and onwards. This simplicity could be for several reason. First of all, the novel is about the different ways in which a Midwestern family handles the issue of their mother's health. Therefore, the vocabulary deals with everyday language because readers are seeing an everyday family. Richard is a pharmacist, Benny is an accountant, Robin is a history teacher, and Daniel is a techie, but the story does not take place in those worlds.

Also, the novel's shifting between perspectives and the future, the present, and the past, can be challenging for some. Adding complicated vocabulary to that could make for laborious reading.

Structure

The book's distinctive structure is non linear and flip flops from one perspective to another. It's built around Edie's story and that story is defined by her weight. Readers first meet her at the age of five when she weighs 62 pounds. Readers next meet her at 202 pounds. Here readers get a glimpse of Edie's future. Readers get her perspective again at 160 pounds when she's in law school and meets Richard. Next readers see



what her life was like at 210 pounds when she was 30. Then Edie is 241 pounds and dealing with a defining moment in a much younger Robin's life. Edie at 332 pounds brings the narration to Edie's present day life.

In between Edie story, the narration gives the perspective of others, helping readers get an understanding of the characters. This supports the theme of the dysfunctional family. The family doesn't know how to communicate with each other, so the narrator has to tell readers what they are thinking and how they feel. Benny admits that when his doctor suggests that he talk to a therapist. Robin also doesn't feel comfortable expressing her thoughts to her boyfriend. She expresses her thoughts in her head instead. Without multiple perspective structure, readers would never be able to understand those surrounding Edie and why they behave as they do.

The movement from the past to the present to the future is a technique that further aids the reader in understanding this messy, dysfunctional family. And allowing readers to glimpse into the future supports themes such as family and relationships. Robin, for example, doesn't speak to her father after he leaves her mother, but, through the technique of foreshadowing, readers learn that she later cries at his funeral.



Quotes

Food was made of love, and love was made of food, and if it could stop a child from crying, then there was nothing wrong with that either.

-- Edie's mother (Edie, 62 Pounds paragraph 27)

Importance: This quote defines Edie's relationship with food throughout her entire life.

That happened a lot in the future, in their family, in their lives going out to dinner with Edie sitting at a separate table."

-- Narrator (Edie, 210 Pounds paragraph 52)

Importance: Having a meal together represents bonding, that is if it is successful. Edie's eating alone so much that the children thought everyone did it shows how dysfunctional the family really is. And the fact that this is done in public emphasizes the point. They are far past the point of even pretending that they are a happy family.

'You don't disappoint me,' said Robin. 'You disappoint yourself.'

-- Robin (Edie, 241 Pounds paragraph 35)

Importance: This quotation sums up Robin's relationship with her mother and the cause of her mother's inability to end her addiction to food. Even though it's done reluctantly, Robin continues to support her mother. She doesn't walk away. But Edie cannot support herself because she feels that she has failed in life. She has disappointed herself.

Thirty years old, and she had failed.

-- Edie (Edie, 210 Pounds paragraph 29)

Importance: At the age of thirty, Edie has a good job, two children, and a husband, but none of this fulfills her. She feels as if she has not lived up to her potential. But she also feels as if her opportunity to do so is over. She has given up on life. This helps explain why she does not try to help herself.

Middlestein and Beverly, two lonely people, successes, failure, a widow, a husband, caught up in something resembling love.

-- Narrator (Middlestein in Love paragraph 47)

Importance: This quotation highlights one of the novel's themes. Can one really love a second time or will a new relationship simply be something that looks like love on the surface? Richard and Beverly go through the motions, but is it really love? And is it better to live in this state than to live alone?

'What's the point of having a book club if you don't get to eat brownies and wine?'

-- Dr. Harris's wife (Male Pattern paragraph 32)

Importance: Dr. Harris's wife's statement shows the hypocrisy that exists in social



circles. His wife is missing the real point of being a member of a book club. She only goes for the surface benefits, an excuse to eat brownies and drink wine in a setting that society deems to be acceptable. If she can't have this benefit, she doesn't see the point in attending the meeting.

He was a fool to think he could have love twice in his life. Arrogance. He held her hand to his chest with both of his hands. No one was entitled to anything in life, not the least of all love.

-- Perspective of Kenneth Song (Sprawl paragraph 70)

Importance: This quotation gets the reader to think about love. Kenneth thinks that he was crazy to think he could find love twice in his life. But is he missing something? What about the idea that it is better to have love and lost than never to have loved at all? Has Kenneth been more fortunate than he realizes? The other issue is how to find love. Does it just happen? Is having love a right, or does one have to work to find it? Or does one have to reach out and ask for it as many in the novel who find a loving relationship do?

There were moments when she suggested things to her husband, mostly in such a way that it seemed like it was his idea to begin with, and there were moments when it was his idea to begin with, and there were moments when she called him on his bullshit, usually while teasing him, so as to take away the sting, and then there were moments, and these moments were rare, because he was a good man, and Edie and Richard had done an excellent job of raising him to be a man and take the right course of action -- when she told him what to do."

-- Narrator (The Willow Tree paragraph 80)

Importance: This quotation shows the nature of Benny's and Rachelle's relationship and how it differs from that of his parents. Rachelle knows how to manage her husband. But even though she manages him to get what she wants, the narration admits that Benny does have good ideas that Robin acknowledges, something that Edie doesn't do with Richard. And, as dysfunctional as Benny's family was, Benny was able to take the good and apply it to his life in general and marriage in particular. It also implies that a woman may be a stay-at-home mom, but that doesn't mean that she doesn't have business savvy.

With grace he offered her his love and protection, and she accepted it, tepidly, warily.

-- Narrator (Edie, 332 Pounds paragraph 24)

Importance: This quote shows both Benny's personality and how Edie views her life. Benny may seem passive, but he takes care of others in his own way. Edie, who thinks she has failed in life, doesn't know how to accept the love others offer her because she thinks that she's not worth it.

Would you find her weak, a weak, pathetic girl, crying because she was losing an argument, losing herself, losing herself into him, and she hadn't let herself feel that way for so long. Would you still want to know her, could you respect her, if she was the kind



of girl who cried when she realized she was falling in love?
-- Narrator from Robin's perspective (Exodus paragraph 90)

Importance: Robin tries to be tough because she has inherited her mother's characteristics, she has experienced the loss of loved ones, and she has just seen her father leave her mother. Still, she has feelings. This quotation explores the idea of whether or not a woman can express her feelings without being perceived as being weak. This question goes beyond romantic relationships. In the business role, if a woman is tough she's not perceived as being a nice person. But if she is too soft, she is perceived as a push over. What is the right balance for women in today's society? That is the question this quote raises.

'You can call or text," said Pierre. 'If you're the texting type.' She wasn't, but she could learn to be.'

-- Pierre and Narrator from Rachelle's perspective (The Willow Tree paragraph 27 and 28)

Importance: This quotation shows how those in social positions that other people aspire to look down on wannabes. And it shows how wannabes will do whatever is necessary to be part of the club.

He respected his mother, because she had raised him with love, and because she was a smart woman even though she was Incredibly stupid.

-- Narrator from Benny's perspective (Eddie, 332 Pounds paragraph 23)

Importance: This quotation highlights two concepts. The first is that a frustrated mother does not equal a bad mother. Edie felt as if she had failed. She didn't know how to play with the kids, but Benny still felt that she had raised him with love. The other concept is that of smart people making bad choices. What caused Edie to make the choices she did? Keeping up appearances? In the end, does that lead to happiness? In Edie's case it didn't. But if we take it outside of Edie's particular experience, readers see that intelligence and making good decisions can be two separate things. So maybe, in order to get people to make good decisions, it's important to appeal to something other than the intellect.